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041443Z Feb 04

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 000850

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ARN, NEA/PA, NEA/AIA, INR/NESA, R/MR,
I/GNEA, B/BXN, B/BRN, NEA/PPD, NEA/IPA FOR ALTERMAN
USAID/ANE/MEA
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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION ON MIDDLE EAST

Summary

-- Lead story in all papers today, February 4, highlights Israeli Prime Minister Sharon's announcement of an initiative to "evacuate" Israeli settlements in Gaza and "exchange" territories with the Palestinians. Another lead story highlights decisions by President Bush and Prime Minister Blair to authorize investigations into pre-war intelligence reports about WMD in Iraq.

Editorial Commentary

-- "Withdrawing from Gaza: a test or a political tremor?"

Semi-official, influential Arabic daily Al-Rai (02/04) editorializes: "It would not be an exaggeration to say that Sharon's mysterious proposal for withdrawing from the Gaza Strip, unilaterally, has caused a political tremor throughout the Israeli and Palestinian arenas that is likely to extend to the entire region and the international arena should Washington intervene and support the move.. It may be too early to discern the potential success of Sharon's plan, assuming that it is genuine and truthful.. Yet, the way Sharon is reading the current Palestinian, Israeli and international status quo encourages such a risky but calculated maneuver in order to appear as a 'man of peace' and avoid political downfall.. There is plenty of time to figure out the response to Sharon's plan, but so far it is clear that Sharon is holding the reins again and is able, through his proposal, to negotiate with everyone in the Israeli and Palestinian arenas as well as the regional and international arenas."

-- "The unilateral separation plan"

Center-left, influential Arabic daily Al-Dustour (02/04) editorializes: "One cannot view the unilateral separation plan, the details of which are now being divulged by Israeli Prime Minister Sharon, in isolation of the political timing and the difficult circumstances that Sharon is going through.. The Israeli Prime Minister wants to reshuffle the cards and get everyone into an illusionary whirlpool that portrays him as the one with the vision for the solution with the Palestinians.. It is natural for the Palestinian Prime Minister to welcome the dismantling of the settlements in Gaza. It is inevitable. Everyone may also welcome Israel's intention to isolate itself behind barricades of its choice. But this approach is nothing more unilateral measures that have nothing to do with the peace process that should be founded on ending the occupation, withdrawing from all territories occupied in 1967, inclusive of East Jerusalem, and establishing an independent, sovereign Palestinian state on the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Anything other than that would not be a peace project. Thus, what is to be understood of the separation plan is that it means turning Israel into a state living behind a wall, with all the inherent difficulties that poses of communicating with it on anything."

-- "A new maneuver or a link in the chain of Israel's final-status solution?"

Daily columnist Urayb Rintawi writes on the op-ed page of center-left, influential Arabic daily Al-Dustour (02/04): "Sharon has the habit of announcing measures to improve the life of Palestinians before every visit to the U.S., which allows the Americans to assure us that he is working for peace, and both then forget

about implementing the measures once the visit is over. This may be another such scenario. But it is more likely a genuine attempt to force a unilateral settlement based on Sharon's vision, by which the Palestinian territories would be reduced to Gaza and about 42% of the West Bank, which lies outside the apartheid wall. This will not satisfy the nationalist aspirations of the Palestinians, but they would not be able to prevent the implementation of the program, nor would they make an effort to prevent Israel from leaving any Palestinian territory. However, the plan cannot succeed because Israelis themselves would reject such territorial concessions, inadequate as they may be."

-- Sharon's new proposals"

Daily columnist Jamil Nimri writes on the back-page of independent, mass-appeal Arabic daily Al-Arab Al-Yawm (02/04): "It is as if Sharon is racing with time. All this dynamic activity and strategically inclined projects indicate that the man wants to specify the direction in which the final solution is heading before he leaves, or is forced to leave his post. On the other hand, the policy of impeding the solution and continuing confrontation has been exhausted. Sharon succeeded in freezing the roadmap and rendering all initiatives before it a failure. He has also neutralized all international powers and therefore has nothing to worry about in terms of pressures, not even (were he to order) the expelling of Arafat, which now seems not to be advantageous to Israel anyway.. And so, he arrived at the initiative of unilateral disengagement as well as the establishment of the racist separation wall.. We wrote more than once saying that Sharon's plan is frighteningly realistic and that he does have the means to implement it. Unfortunately, we never saw a counterpoint Palestinian strategy. Sharon seems not to want to miss this opportunity of getting everything he wants, for he has come up with the idea of resolving the demographic problem that has been keeping the Jewish entity awake at night in the same deal. He suggested annexing some Arab villages in Israel to the Palestinian entity within the framework of 'the exchange of territories'.. What is this ingenuity of employing the concept of exchanging territories in this manner! More confiscation of Arab lands and liberation of Israel of Arab inhabitants! We will assume that this just another one of Sharon's tests. However, let us not forget that his maneuver is based on the genuine anxiety that is common to all political powers in Israel, the country's demographic future. And let us not forget that what sounded like a far-fetched illusionary proposal in the past was made possible by the Israelis."

GNEHM